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Juan Downey,  
*Tushushuwaiwe*  
or *Viewpoint as*  
*Context*, 1977,  
photo-collage  
including 24  
black-and-white  
photographs,  
9 × 12.5cm each.  
All images courtesy  
Marilys Belt de  
Downey

## Yanomami, Let's Talk

— Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Helena Vilalta

Juan Downey was an upper-middle-class Chilean intellectual who, like most South American intellectuals at the time, felt strong links with Europe and had sympathies for Cuba. Not surprisingly, upon graduating as an architect in 1961, he left Santiago for Madrid, Barcelona and later Paris, and only somewhat reluctantly did he accept, in 1965, an invitation to go to the US, where he might have been surprised to be considered Latin American. Upon his arrival in Washington DC, he experimented with all kinds of technologies — from robots to radio waves and photo-electric cells — to create interactive installations and performances, which attempted to visualise the systems of energy that, although invisible to the naked eye,

available to artists at the time, personal interaction with these systems of energy became increasingly pivotal to his work. In *Invisible Energy Dictates a Dance Concert* (1969), five dancers responded to the music created by sensors placed near the Smithsonian in Washington, whilst in *Energy Fields* (1972), which he developed after relocating to New York in 1969, a group of dancers interacted with ultrasonic waves in the gallery space so as to render this energy field visible with their movements.<sup>2</sup>

If these works helped make the gallery walls porous to the outside world, Downey's experimentation with the feedback capacity of video led him to focus on collective forms of spiritual, emotional and psychological energy. In *Three Way Communication by Light* (1972), three performers are each placed at the vertex of a triangle, their faces painted white to become the screen upon which the pre-recorded footage of another performer's portrait is projected. A small mirror shows them their transformation, while a video monitor plays it back to the audience after the performance is over. At the same time, a laser beam projects yet another performer's voice, furthering the confusion between the three selves. The idea of transfiguration is taken up again in *Plato Now* (1973), in which nine performers are sat in a line, all facing the gallery wall, and are submerged in meditation, as they listen to pre-recorded selections of Plato's dialogues on headphones. The recurrence of the quotes is regulated by their alpha waves, or brain signals produced during intense states of relaxation, detected by headsets of electrodes. As in *Three Way Communication by Light*, a closed-circuit television system

### Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Helena Vilalta examine Juan Downey's work with the Yanomami against the backdrop of concurrent anthropological debates.

define our physical, emotional and ideological environments. Developed for the US iteration of the landmark exhibition 'Cybernetic Serendipity', *With Energy Beyond These Walls: A System of Two Sculptures* (1969), for example, stages a dialogue between two sculptures and the urban environment outside the gallery: a roughly anthropomorphic, boxy, white sculpture equipped with sensors translates different sources of energy such as heat or radio waves into musical tones, which are, in turn, broadcast by an amplifier.<sup>1</sup> As Downey began to experiment with time-based media such as dance and video, a technology which was just becoming

- 1 'Cybernetic Serendipity', Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1 August—20 October 1968 and Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 16 July—31 August 1969, curated by Jasia Reichardt.
- 2 *Invisible Energy Dictates a Dance Concert* was performed by Carmen Beuchat, Kitty Duane, Ana Maria Fuensalida, Victoria Larraín and Titi Lamadrid at Smithsonian Associates, Washington DC, 11 August 1969. It was re-created at the Cinematheque in New York in 1970, where Graciela Figueroa responded to the movements of another six dancers, who in turn responded to the environment within the building. *Energy Fields* was performed by Beuchat, Trisha Brown, Caroline Gooden, Suzanne Harris, Rachel Lew, Barbara Lloyd, Gordon Matta-Clark, Penelope Newcomb, Judith Padow, Gerald Schieber and Downey at artist-run space 112 Greene Street, New York, on 21 February 1972.



records the performers' transformed faces, broadcasting them to video monitors placed behind their backs. Here, however, viewers are not mere observers: their shadows are projected onto the wall faced by the meditators, akin to the passing shadows that comprise 'the prison-house [of] the world of sight' in Plato's allegory of the cave.<sup>3</sup> In Downey's attention to invisible forms of energy we can recognise a similar critique of the dominance of vision, but one that differs radically from Plato's idealism: Downey's enquiry sought to explore forms of perception and communication that overcame both vision and language — forms that the artist envisaged as 'direct and free exchange of information more similar to the exercise of telepathy than to the cumbersome TV box.'<sup>4</sup> Liberation, *Plato Now* seems to suggest, will not come from a distanced reflection upon the world but rather from a deeper engagement with our inner selves; it is meditation rather than rational thought that may help the performers-cum-prisoners break the chains of ignorance.

Downey's enquiry into the transformation of the self can be seen against the backdrop of his preoccupation with his personal identity as a Chilean expatriate living in the US. Allusions to his home country recur in his work of the period: from the unrealised project *Invisible Energy in Chile Plays a Concert in New York* (1969), which aimed to connect the urban environments of Santiago and New York via satellite technology, arguably 'an exhortation ... "to face the music" from Chile ... [in] reference to the election of Salvador Allende',<sup>5</sup> to a series of works around the natural fertiliser Chilean nitrate, realised in 1971, in which his interest in ecological systems dovetails with his critique of US

chemical corporations. Perhaps seized by the desire to 'recover' his South American roots, in the early 1970s he began to imagine the plot for a road movie of sorts, in which he would travel from the northernmost to the southernmost point in the Americas, recording footage of different forms of living and mythologies practiced across the continent. In the spring of 1973, he writes:

*This automobile trip was designed to develop an encompassing perspective amongst the various populations which today inhabit the American continents, by means of a videotaped account, from the northern cold forest to the southern tip of the Americas — a form of evolution in space while infolding time, playing back one culture in the context of another as well as the culture itself in its own context, and finally editing all the interactions of space, time and context into a work of art.*<sup>6</sup>

Although *Video Trans Americas* (1973–76) ended up focusing almost exclusively on Central and South America, the project retains many of the features of this envisaged road movie. Between the summers of 1973 and 1974, Downey undertook four separate trips, to Mexico and Guatemala; Texas; Peru and Bolivia; and Chile, often accompanied by his family. The video diaries of these trips were later edited in several tapes, each associated with a specific region or locality.<sup>7</sup> The contents of the videos range from views of pre-Columbian architecture to images of everyday life, folk music and artisanal traditions, but their editing places them apart from the observational point of view commonly associated with ethnographic documentaries: the camera movements,

3 Plato, *The Republic* (c.380 BCE, trans. Benjamin Jowett), New York: Cosimo Books, 2008, p.179.

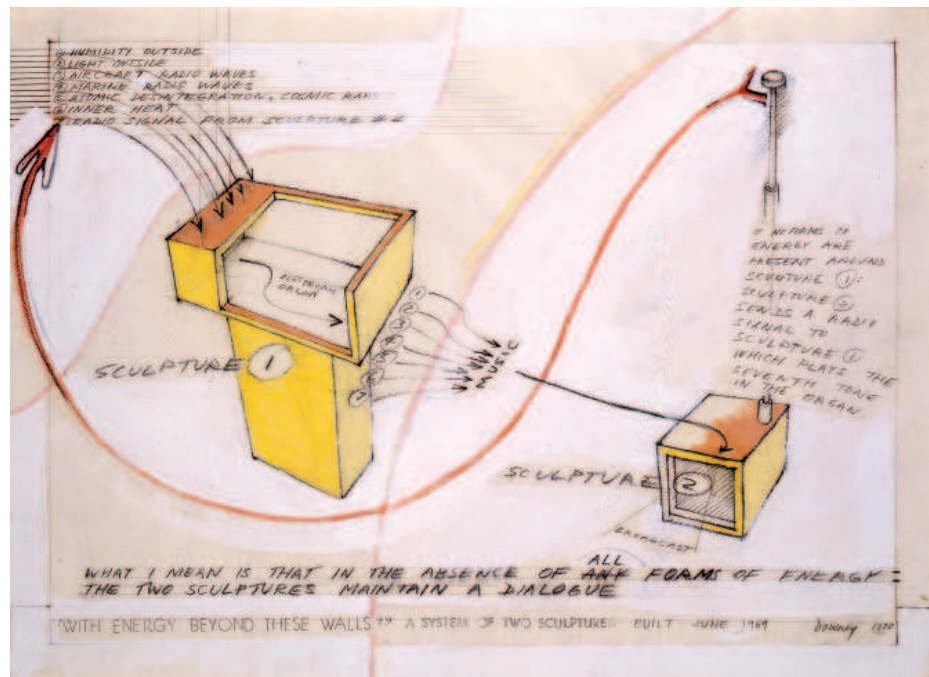
4 Juan Downey, 'Architecture, Video, Telepathy: A Communications Utopia' (1977), in Nuria Enguita Mayo and Juan Guardiola (ed.), *Juan Downey: With Energy Beyond These Walls* (exh. cat.), Valencia: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 1998, p.34.

5 James Harithas and David Ross, "Offspring of My Soul": Juan Downey's Art of the 1960s and 70s', in *ibid.*, p.329.

6 J. Downey, 'Travelogues of *Video Trans Americas*, 1973–75', quoted in *ibid.*, p.330.

7 These videos were later incorporated into several performances and installations, which explored the tension between the spatial continuity and the dislocation articulated in the tapes. In the performance *Video Trans Americas De-Briefing Pyramid* (1974), Downey suspended a dozen monitors from the ceiling to form a square, and placed another two monitors in its centre, one near to the ceiling and the other one on the floor, to create an octahedron based on the proportions of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Placed at the centre of the space, Beuchat performed a slow dance that resonated with the images of South American pyramids that Downey had recorded during his expeditions, which were broadcast to the monitors. But perhaps the most iconic and widely reproduced presentation of the series was the installation that Downey created for his exhibition 'Video Trans Americas' at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (4 June–4 July 1976). There Downey drew a blown-up map of South America on the gallery floor, upon which he placed two-channel versions of the footage he recorded, distributed geographically and signalling the height of each region via the height of the monitor plinths. An additional projection showed *Moving* (1974), a video that compiled footage from all the expeditions.

Juan Downey,  
*With Energy Beyond These Walls: A System of Two Sculptures*,  
 1970, colour pencil,  
 graphite and acrylic  
 on paper, 56 × 75cm



at times seemingly random, and the unconventional editing, often working upon the idea of cyclical reiteration, signal the artist's effort not so much to understand another reality as to partake in a certain cadence of life. Occasional voice-overs, often readings from Downey's diaries, further situate the videos within the artist's personal enquiry. The two-channel video *Uros 1 & 2* (1975), for example, in which Downey compares the Inca ruins that he visited near Cuzco, Peru, with the temporary dwellings built by the Uros — pre-Incan peoples who live in self-fashioned, floating islands on Lake Titicaca, on the border between Peru and Bolivia — reveals his process of self-questioning as the journey was nearing its end:

*Like a chemical catalyst I expected to remain identical after my video exchange had enlightened many American peoples by the cross-references of their cultures. I proved to be a false catalyst when I was devoured by the effervescence of myths of nature and language ... Only then I grew creative and in manifold directions. Me, the agent of change, using video to decode my own roots. I was forever deciphered and became a true offspring of my soil, less intellectual and more poetic.<sup>8</sup>*

Spurred by the 1973 coup in Chile and Allende's death, which cut short his very first trip to Central America, Downey at first entertained this project as a political contribution to a pan-South American revolutionary identity, one marked by the 'clash between two beauties[:] the conceptual structure and ... politics understood as society's erotic survival'.<sup>9</sup> By 1976, however, his quest was for his own self through a deeper immersion in primeval South America. He sought it in Venezuela: in the summer of 1976 he set off again to the Amazonian basin, but the first Indian people he visited there were the Guahibo, who were not, as he says in the video *Guahibos* (1976), 'primitive enough'. The Yanomami, in contrast, would fit the bill. He stayed seven months with them, from November 1976 until May 1977, with his wife Marilys Belt de Downey and stepdaughter Titi Lamadrid.

✱

The Yanomami (also known by many other names such as Yanomamo, Yanomama, Yanoama and Waiká) live on both sides of the Venezuelan–Brazilian border. There are around 16,000 Yanomami living in Venezuela and 20,000 in Brazil. Because their language (four different dialects

8 J. Downey, 'Travelogues of Video Trans Americas, 1973–75', in N. Enguita Mayo and J. Guardiola (ed.), *Juan Downey: With Energy Beyond These Walls*, op. cit., p.335. Another version of this text appears in his written travelogues from May 1975.

9 *Ibid.*, p.333.



of which are spoken) bears no relation to any other Amazonian language and because they are genetically very different from other Amazonian Indians, the Yanomami are considered to be quite unique. Perhaps because of this, they have been put, as the French have it, *à toutes les sauces*. The first-hand account of the Yanomami by Helena Valero, transcribed by Italian doctor and anthropologist Ettore Biocca in the book *Yanoama* (1965), is one of domestic life, struggles and hardship, but also love and respect. The daughter of a Brazilian peasant, Valero was abducted by the Yanomami as a young girl, and was first married to a great leader — the generous, humorous and valorous Fusiwe — and then, after his death in battle, to a lesser character. The publication of the book in French and May '68 coalesced in influential anthropological debates. That same year, US anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, then living in Paris in a structuralist milieu, published the ground-breaking paper 'The First Affluent Society', in which he argued that so-called primitive societies were not about maximising goods, but about maximising leisure; they did not lack goods, rather they opted to limit their needs.<sup>10</sup> A political version of this economic

argument came out two years later. Similarly, based on a short stay with the Yanomami and his own lengthy ethnography of the Guayaki in Paraguay, French anthropologist Pierre Clastres elaborated an anarchist view of lowland Amerindian societies as organised to prevent the emergence of the state. Rather than lacking a state structure, he argued, their social structure actively opposed the emergence of systems of power.

Also in 1968, the US anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon published a contrasting account of the Yanomami, in *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*, which pictured them as sly, warlike and violent. Chagnon later produced films such as *The Axe Fight* (1975), consistent with his derogative depiction of the Yanomami, in collaboration with Timothy Asch, an anthropologist and film-maker who would become influential in the creation of the field of visual anthropology and who went on to author some 22 films on the Yanomami. During that time, Chagnon met French anthropologist Jacques Lizot, who also stayed with the Yanomami between 1968 and 1970 and was later to spend two decades in the field, and both anthropologists envisaged collaborating. But by 1976,

Yanomami relaxing in ceremonial attire, 1976–77.  
Photograph:  
Juan Downey

10 See Marshall Sahlins, 'La Première société d'abondance', *Les Temps modernes*, vol.268, 1968, pp.641–80.



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when Lizot's *Le Cercle des feux* (*The Circle of Fires*) came out in France, his account could hardly be more different from Chagnon's portrayal of the Yanomami as aggressive people, aligning himself instead with Valero's initial narrative. Chagnon's account was then picked up by a school of ecological determinist anthropologists who attributed the Yanomami's violence to ecological factors — a reading further opposed by Lizot, who maintained his cultural account, which was also consistent with Sahlin's and Clastres's views. Presumably, to this day, the Yanomami are hardly aware that they were, and are, fodder for ink-spilling wars, which we do not need to delve further into. Suffice it to say that before living with the Yanomami Downey had clearly read both Chagnon's and Lizot's accounts and, as we shall see, in his videos he adopts one or the other anthropologist's views with equanimity, which is rather surprising.

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***Downey's interest in the idea of cyclical reiteration signals an effort not so much to understand another reality as to partake in a certain cadence of life.***

During his stay with the Yanomami, Downey produced a vast and diverse body of work. Informed by his practice of meditation as well as the colours associated with the psychedelic experiences of the Yanomami during shamanic rituals, he made over a hundred drawings of circles and spirals in yellow, grey and white, which he later also penned on cartographic representations, as if attempting to map the energetic fields of the South American continent. In addition, he also produced black-and-white photographs, photographic collages and video footage that he later edited as single-channel tapes as well as multi-channel installations. Amongst these, the most enthralling is *The Circle of Fires* (1979), a three-channel video that is shown across six pairs of monitors displayed in a circular configuration, so that the channels are combined in different permutations. The installation shows gestures, expressions, attitudes, gazes, body paint and body parts such as half-faces, torsos, legs, feet and

hands, in which the actions read as a litany of movement: grating, paddling, cutting, knotting, throwing oneself in one's hammock and letting one's hand hang from it, lying sickly in it, delousing, nursing, taking food to one's mouth, looking, singing, chanting, healing, lying still, parading in the village, placing one's foot, laughing. We see fibres too, and water, flowers, ropes, trees, leaves, bark, stones, a mountain. And then, we hear a child crying, the sound of water flowing, bird cries, human voices, songs, a glimpse at a universe of sounds. After watching the videos, one feels able to recognise a Yanomami just by bodily attitudes.

The single-channel video *The Singing Mute* (1977-78), by contrast, is peppered with references — are they serious, are they mocking? — to Chagnon's portrait of the Yanomami as fierce people. Such ferocity is invoked in a sequence where two young men, one with a loaded shotgun and the other with a bow and arrow, seemingly threaten Downey, to which he responds by pointing his camera, a dangerous weapon if any. Showing no fear, the young men lower their weapons and the episode makes for good laughs in the village. The film somewhat mimics a National Geographic documentary in its choice of topics: shamanic healing, hallucinogens being blown into shamans' noses, visions and even endocannibalism. These scenes, however, also contain subjective elements that defy the conventional documentarian's veneer of objectivity. It is Downey's adolescent stepdaughter, for example, who tells us about the Yanomami's beliefs such as the myth of origin of women, who are thought to have been born from a man's pregnant leg, while in another scene we see Downey speaking on the phone from New York (perhaps a metaphor for communicating with distant entities). Further, unlike in observational documentaries, here the video camera and its recordings take centre stage, both in a confrontation with two threatening youngsters and then when a Yanomami crowd watch the footage of a deaf mute who insisted on being filmed.

*The Abandoned Shabono* (1978) gives us yet another picture. Or rather two different pictures, since it can itself be seen as operating on two different registers. One is an account of a view alternative to Chagnon's portrayal of the Yanomami, articulated through an

Juan Downey,  
*World Map*, 1979,  
oil on canvas,  
183 × 208cm









interview with Lizot himself, who further references the work of Clastres and Sahlins. A number of readings reminiscent of classical ethnography are displayed: the video shows us how the *shabono* (a circular, uninterrupted sequence of hearths under a single roof, which essentially constitutes the village) is a microcosm of the Yanomami view of the universe, where dramatic shamanic performances replicate cosmology. The map of the households within the *shabono* is also a graphic version of the Yanomami kinship system and marriage rules, where descent is traced through males. The video's explanation of these kinship structures borrows freely from its ethnographic sources: *The Abandoned Shabono* chronicles how the Yanomami form alliances through inter-village feasts, which can often degenerate into fights; how they oppose central power and the chief has more duties rather than actual power (this is Clastres); how they form a society of leisure (this is Sahlins), spending no more than three or four hours a day of work time; and, last but not least, how they consume three times the protein they need (this is Sahlins again, opposing ecological determinism). The corollary of the series of traits that Downey espoused was that the Yanomami lacked nothing in their economic and political organisation — rather they had chosen the good life, with no bosses or labour duties pestering them. One could insert this view into a *longue durée* of the French philosophical tradition that started with Montaigne in the sixteenth century — which was itself based on first-hand contemporary accounts of indigenous peoples in South America.

At the same time, one may suspect *The Abandoned Shabono* to be a parody of authoritative voices, an anticipation of the sort of critique that flooded the field of anthropology in the US after the mid-1980s. In contrast to his earlier work, whose editing sought to mimic the rhythm of life of its subjects, Downey here seems to emphasise the trappings that connote authority in such a setting: the interview between Downey and Lizot, for example, is formally staged, as if it was intended for television broadcast, with a neatly combed Downey wearing a jacket and tie and Lizot answering in French, with simultaneous translation.

Also remarkable is the sharp contrast between Downey's own reading of the

Yanomami and anthropological discourse, be it Chagnon's or Lizot's. What struck Downey, as is clear in the comments at the start of the video, is the Yanomami's sense of impermanence: these people abandon their villages after some time and move elsewhere. The forest reclaims every trace of their existence: villages, gardens and trails disappear after a while. This was a profound and original insight by Downey, for indeed the Yanomami are masters in the art of impermanence. Their dead are to be forgotten, their names not to be uttered. Their flesh is left to rot away, their bones are carefully burned and their ashes, mixed in a plantain porridge, are swallowed by their close relatives. Only the living are to live. Downey appeared seduced by this sense of a revolving cycle of life and in his subsequent video, *The Laughing Alligator* (1979), he expresses a wish to be buried inside another human body — to be eaten up, in short. He voices this desire, importantly, with his body painted in the jagged striped style of the Yanomami.

Was that desire to be 'eaten up' by the Yanomami to be understood as the ultimate pursuit of an original South American identity? It would be facile to label Juan Downey as an illumination-seeker, haunting so-called primitive tribes — although in *Guahibo* he does state that he is 'looking for very pure Indians, looking for very primitive minds'. The Venezuelan Guahibo Indians, he said, wear pants or dresses, and would not do — hence the Yanomami, those 'hard-to-find, pure Indians' that look like the *terminus ad quem* of Downey's quest for his 'own self in South America'. With such a story, what would distinguish Downey from any other new-age identity or wisdom seeker? 'If I could only lean my head on your secret vitality', the video continues, but then he goes on to state: 'and let the river of our dialogue never stop...' This latter sentence makes all the difference. By the end of his *Videobildung*, Downey's quest is no longer for identity, but rather, much more wisely, for dialogue.

'Complex Indian nature', he says, 'let's talk'.



If in the late 1970s Downey offered the Yanomami the opportunity to shoot sequences themselves, some ten years later, Brazilian indigenous peoples were



Children watching Juan Downey's videos during the first *Video Trans Americas* journey, Santa María de los Ríos, Mexico, 1973. Photograph: Bill Gerstein

already shooting their own videos, with the assistance of the project *Video nas Aldeias* (Video in Indigenous Villages), initiated by Vincent Carelli at the Centro de Trabalho Indigenista (Centre for Work with Indigenous Peoples) in São Paulo and Brasília.<sup>11</sup> Since then, videos made by indigenous peoples have become instrumental in many ways. Some have been used for self-representation, with long exhaustive sequences of rituals. But they have also been put to explicit political use, focusing on encroachments and other violations of indigenous rights. During the harsh debates on indigenous rights at the Brazilian Constitutional Assembly in 1988, for example, Kayapo peoples were strongly present in Brasília, some using video cameras to record the politicians' utterances so as to report their own version of the disputes back to their communities.

There have been several attempts to build a writing orthodoxy for indigenous languages, of which more than 180 are spoken today in Brazil: from the early colonial Jesuit precursors to the US evangelical missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics and New Tribes Missions, who have more recently

outnumbered linguists and NGOs in trying to establish and stabilise indigenous languages' writing with the aim of translating and disseminating the Bible and its teachings. Although the 1988 Brazilian Constitution mandated that children should acquire literacy in their mother tongue, including indigenous languages, to this day indigenous parents question the utility of writing in the local language and press for more fluency in Brazilian Portuguese. Writing in local languages, it is felt, may undermine oral tradition and elders' authority. While the politics of writing is still in debate, indigenous youngsters have found in video instead a much more useful and direct medium for communication, one that respects an oral authoritative regime and bypasses written servitude. When viewed against the backdrop of Downey's work with the Yanomami, these videos can be seen to embody something of the artist's 'communications utopia' — his longing for a 'diversity of signals' that would 'harmonise the act of perceiving with the self's projection onto the culture' and thus oppose the 'pyramidal oppressive hierarchy' of the mass media.<sup>12</sup>

11 Excerpts from the videos produced by *Video nas Aldeias* can be viewed online at <http://www.videonasaldeias.org.br/2009/index.php> (last accessed on 13 August 2014).  
12 J. Downey, 'Architecture, Video, Telepathy: A Communications Utopia', *op. cit.*, p.347.